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Jack HallTowell

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BLACK FOOTED FERRET REINTRODUCTION

The vast sagebrush-grasslands of Shirley Basin, between Casper and Laramie, will be the scene Tuesday of a ceremony to mark the reintroduction of black-footed ferrets to the wild.

The ceremony, which is open to the public, is scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. near the reintroduction site and is expected to attract media from many parts of the country. Wyoming's Governor, Mike Sullivan, and John Turner, Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, himself a native of Wyoming, head the list of speakers.

Once considered a lost species because none could be found anywhere in the world, black-footed ferrets have been "retrieved" through a captive breeding program that had its small and pioneer beginnings at the Sybille Wildlife Research Center near Wheatland, Wyoming in 1985. A cooperative venture between the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the program now has been expanded to five zoos in other parts of the country.

All of the ferrets are descendants of a small colony of ferrets discovered in a prairie dog town near Meeteetse, Wyoming. They were kept under observation but were left to themselves for several years.

However, with what appeared to be the only surviving representatives of an entire world species at risk from canine distemper, a fatal disease for ferrets, administrators made the decision to capture the remaining 18 ferrets so that a captive breeding program could be undertaken.

Attesting to the spectacular success of the program is the fact that enough ferrets now exist to allow reintroduction to the wild to begin. Black-footed ferrets at the captive breeding locations now number 322.

Others who will appear on Tuesday's one-hour dedication ceremony include Galen Buterbaugh, Regional Director, FWS; Pete Petera, Director, Wyoming Game and Fish Department; Ray Brubaker, Wyoming Director, U.S. Bureau of Land Management; Jack Turnell, Meeteetse rancher and member of the Black-footed Ferret Advisory Team; Tom Dougherty, Western Division Staff Director, National Wildlife Federation, and Dr. Tom Thorne, wildlife veterinarian, Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Dr. Thorne is the leader of the working group in charge of the captive breeding program at Sybille.